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THE BOOK OF ESTHER IN THE LIGHT OF HISTORY

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CHAPTER I

The ill-fate of the Book of Esther—The Greek version—The apocryphal additions—Talmudic interpretations—Luther's verdict—Modern theories—Conservative exegetes—Errors of the interpreters—The interpolators in the Maccabean period—The erroneous identification of the king of Esther.

IF there were any truth in the cabbalistic maxim, 'All depends on fate, even the Scriptures', we would say that the Book of Esther was ill-fated from the very outset. It relates how once upon a time, in the Persian period, a terrible danger to the Jews was averted by natural circumstances, without any visible divine intervention. In our sceptical age, we should expect such a story to be held the most credible of all the narratives of the Old Testament. Just the contrary has happened. None among them is more discredited by modern exegetes, except a few, than this story. The narrative is by some partly doubted, partly denied, by others denied altogether. But it is only fair to say that they are not to blame.¹ The current interpreta-

¹ There is, however, no excuse for the unfair treatment of the story of Esther by not a few of the modern critics who are not satisfied with demonstrating its unhistorical character, but for the purpose of impressing upon the mind of the reader its fabulous absurdity, frequently distort the facts and make forced interpretations. The arguments and theories of many of them would be more convincing if they were presented in an objective manner, and were not seasoned with abusive language directed at the contents of this story, its tendency, and at the Jews in general. For

tion hardly admits of a more favourable conclusion. However, it is evident that already in antiquity the facts had been distorted and represented in a false light. Interpreters who lived two hundred years or more after the events of the story occurred, and knew nothing about the real issue of those events, corrupted the text according to their own wrong interpretations.

The Alexandrian Jew who translated the story into Greek—at a time, however, before the Hebrew text was greatly corrupted—increased the perplexity.² The Greek version, being a free and paraphrastic translation, naturally does not square with the original Hebrew text. But the differences touch also in a striking manner the proper names,³ a fact that cannot be due to paraphrase or exegesis. This phenomenon gave cause to suspect the authenticity of the Hebrew text.⁴ No other satisfactory

specimens of this kind, we may point to Carl Siegfried, in his commentary on the Book of Esther (in Nowack's 'Hand-Commentar zum Alten Testament', Göttingen, 1901); Paul de Lagarde in his essay 'Purim', Göttingen, 1887; G. Jahn in his book 'Esther', Leiden, 1901; see also note 26.

² For the various Greek and Latin versions of Esther, cf. B. Jacob, 'Esther bei den LXX' (in Stade's *Zeitschrift für Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, Giessen, 1890, pp. 241-98); L. B. Paton, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther*, New York, 1908, pp. 29-47; P. Haupt, 'Critical Notes on Esther' (in *Old Testament and Semitic Studies in Memory of William Rainey Harper*, Chicago, 1908, pp. 115-93); H. Willrich, 'Esther und Judith' (in his *Judaica*, Göttingen, pp. 1-28), and G. Jahn's book cited above. The latter's Hebrew rendering of the Greek version is an amateurish biblical parody, but several of his observations deserve serious consideration.

³ See Jacob, *l. c.*, p. 271.

⁴ Willrich, *l. c.*, p. 15, seriously maintains that the Book of Esther was originally written in Greek and subsequently translated into Hebrew. There is no need to discuss this impossible view, as Willrich himself reluctantly concedes that the Hebrew text in several places exhibits more originality than the Greek (p. 19, n. 1), and, moreover, confesses that he is unable to examine the linguistic character of the former.

explanation for this odd divergence has been forthcoming. This difficulty is due to the fact that the action was placed in the wrong period. The difference between the two versions is easily explained as soon as we know that Egypt was not a part of the Persian empire at the period of these events.⁵ Hence the Egyptian Jews were not involved in the decree of Haman, and probably knew nothing about the events of Purim.⁶ The Alexandrian translator, who apparently was a learned and pious Jew, may have lived in Palestine or in some other part of Syria among pious Jews who observed the festival of Purim.⁷ Having annually listened to the reading of the Book of Esther, he may have known it fairly well by heart, but could not remember correctly most of the proper names. After returning to his own country, he translated this story for the edification

⁵ Egypt revolted from Persia in the year 405 B.C.E., and remained independent for a period of sixty-five years. The latter, however, never recognized Egypt's independence, and frequently made futile attempts to reduce it to obedience.

⁶ We thus fully agree with Willrich (*l. c.*, p. 3), that the Alexandrian Jews had neither observed the festival of Purim, nor known anything about these events, before the story was written in Greek. But we go still further and maintain, that even after they had become acquainted with this story, the Alexandrian Jews had no cause to celebrate the events of Purim. This festival was most likely introduced into Egypt by Palestinian Jews not long before the destruction of the Temple.

⁷ We must bear in mind that the pious of that period who strictly observed all religious ordinances represented only a small fraction of the Jews. The common people had abandoned the celebration of Purim long ago. Therefore, there was no reason for the author of the First Book of the Maccabees to refer to the latter festival, even if it had coincided with Nicanor Day, which it did not. Thus the objections of Willrich and all critics on this point are unfounded. Moreover, if Willrich were right in his assertion that the author of the First Book of the Maccabees assumes a decidedly hostile attitude towards the Pharisees, we could not expect this author to mention a festival observed solely by this pious sect.

of his countrymen. Not having had a Hebrew copy at his disposal, and the translation not having been intended for liturgic purposes, but merely as a novel, he substituted numerous fictitious names for those in the original.⁸

⁸ Jacob, *l. c.*, pp. 266 ff., is certainly right in concluding that the Greek version is a free translation from the Hebrew text. But that alone would not account for the proper names, as Jacob (p. 270, n. 1) freely admits, which with the exception of a few differ entirely from those of the Hebrew text (cf. Paton, *l. c.*, pp. 66-71). Furthermore, a free translator would hardly omit passages without paraphrasing them, and would rather add than omit. Finally, it seems improbable that he should have paraphrased passages in a way which show the story in a different light, as he did in the passages containing the decrees of Haman and Mordecai. Jahn's sweeping assertion that the Greek version, on all points, resembles more the original than the Masoretic text, is not to be taken seriously. Willrich's view that the story was originally written in Greek (see n. 4), cannot be considered at all. But even the present writer's explanation that the Greek translator did not have a Hebrew copy at his disposal when he made his translation, is not free from objections. It is incredible that the translator should not have remembered the name of Ahasuerus which occurs twenty-eight times in the story, the gentile noun Agagi which occurs six times, and especially the passage: 'And he thought scorn to lay hands on Mordecai alone; for they had showed him the people of Mordecai' (3. 6), which is of vital importance for the understanding of the main event of our story. But in the opinion of the present writer, the Hebrew text underwent considerable changes after it had been translated into Greek. The Alexandrian translator was a pious, conscientious Jew and a good Hebrew scholar who, though paraphrasing the original text and substituting fictitious names, did not consciously omit anything. The omissions found are due to his exegesis. Thus, for instance, he could not understand the meaning of *ומדבר כלשון עמו* (1. 22) and *ובהקבץ בתולות שנית* (2. 19), and not having been able to consult the original, he attributed the difficulties to his bad memory, and omitted them altogether. He may have known and applied the maxim: 'In doubtful cases, omission is preferable to doing wrong' (*שב ואל תעשה ערף*). Nor could he understand the difficult passages *ובבאה לפני המלך אמר עם הספר* (9. 25), and *דברי הצומות וועקתם* (9. 31), but in these cases, having been convinced that they were corrupt, he explained them differently. The fact, that so far none of the commentators have been able to explain the passages quoted satisfactorily, leaves no doubt that the

The apocryphal writer went a step farther.⁹ To his pious mind it seemed inconceivable that such a miraculous

Greek translator was a good Hebrew scholar. His memory, however, played him a trick as to the date of Esther's elevation. Since the twelfth month played so important a part in the events of Esther, he believed that Esther's elevation took place in the same month. This wrong date proves again that he translated from memory; for if the original had contained this date, there was not the least reason for any interpolator to place that event in the tenth month. As for the decrees, however, the translator neither omitted anything nor paraphrased them, but presented an exact translation (see Chapter IX). The passage 3. 6 is undoubtedly due to a late interpreter who believed that Haman's decree was caused by his enmity towards Mordecai. We owe a debt of gratitude to the Greek translator who showed us that the original Hebrew author was quite innocent of this stupidity. As to the name Artaxerxes in the Greek version, there is not the least doubt that the Hebrew text, even in a late period, contained the name **אֲרַחְשֵׁרֶשׁ** (see Chapter IV). The gentilic noun Agagi in the Hebrew text is not original either (see Chapter II).

⁹ The Greek version has at the end a subscription giving information about its authorship and date, which reads: 'In the fourth year of the reign of Ptolemy and Cleopatra, Dositheus, who said that he was a priest and Levite, and Ptolemy his son, brought the foregoing letter concerning Phourai, which they said was genuine, and that Lysimachus, son of Ptolemy, one of the people of Jerusalem, had interpreted it' (*Ἐτους τετάρτου βασιλεύοντος Πτολεμαίου καὶ Κλεοπάτρας, εἰσήνεγκε Δοσίθεος, ὃς ἔφη εἶναι ἱερεὺς καὶ Λευΐτης, καὶ Πτολεμαῖος υἱὸς αὐτοῦ, τὴν προκειμένην ἐπιστολὴν τῶν Φρουραί, ἣν ἔφασαν εἶναι, καὶ ἡρμηνευκέναι Λυσίμαχον Πτολεμαίου, τῶν ἐν Ἱερουσαλὴμ*). Jacob, *l. c.*, p. 274, maintains that the king Ptolemy referred to in this subscription was Ptolemy VII, Soter II, Lathurus, who reigned 117-81 B.C.E., and thus the introduction of our story into Egypt occurred in the year 114, while Willrich, *l. c.*, p. 4 f., contends that this king was Ptolemy XIV, and that the Book of Esther was composed in the year 48 B.C.E. However, both of them are wrong as far as the date of the Greek version is concerned. The subscription does not refer to the original Greek version of our story. Willrich himself points out that the Alexandrian scribe was not convinced of the genuineness of this Book and declined to take any responsibility for it (p. 3). Jacob likewise observes that expressions in this subscription indicate something like distrust (p. 276). This is of course the meaning of the clause *ἣν ἔφασαν εἶναι*. What reason had the Alexandrian scribe to doubt the genuineness of this Book? The Alexandrian Jewish scholars to whom we are indebted for the preservation of so many apocryphal books

event should be narrated unless abounding in religious sentiments, and he believed it to be a meritorious deed to improve upon its contents by representing the chief Jewish figures in the story as saints in Israel. This representation, though obviously contrary to the facts, was nevertheless generally accepted in ancient and modern times. Flavius Josephus, in his *Antiquities*, moulded into his story of Esther both the Hebrew and Greek versions—though more of the latter than of the former¹⁰—and considerable parts

were not so hypercritical as to doubt the event of Purim. With the exception of Sirach, none of the apocryphal books has a subscription. Paton, *l.c.*, p. 30, observes: 'A more serious objection to the genuineness of the subscription is the fact that it stands at the end of the long additions that seem to come from a different hand from that of the original translator'. However, this fact does not prove that the subscription is not genuine. There had been a well-known Greek version of Esther long before the arrival of Dositheus. But the latter brought another version, enlarged and interpolated by additions, and asserted that it was the genuine story of Esther translated from the Hebrew text, contending that the old version was defective. Therefore, the Alexandrian scribe who copied it rightly doubted his assertion, and declined to accept any responsibility for its truth. The original Greek version was undoubtedly made in a pre-Maccabaeen period. This seems to be the true reason why the Book of Esther is the only historical book in the Greek Old Testament that has a subscription.

¹⁰ We cannot agree with Jacob, *l.c.*, p. 291, that Josephus faithfully follows LXX, and Jahn, *l.c.*, p. x, is perfectly right on this point. Josephus calls Haman an Amalekite, which can be only a translation of *Agagi* of the Hebrew text, while the Greek version has instead of it *Bovγαιος*. Then Josephus quotes the passage *ויבז בעיניו*, which LXX omits (see n. 8). Further, he gives the names of the two conspiring eunuchs *בגתן ותרם*, but appears to have read *גבתן ותרם*, which are omitted in LXX. Finally, in accordance with the Hebrew text, he states that the Jews slew seventy-five thousand Gentiles, while LXX knows only of fifteen thousand. Nevertheless, Josephus evidently preferred the Greek version for his purpose. He may have done so for linguistic reasons. A Jew translating the Old Testament into a foreign tongue would for the most part, if possible, make use of and adhere to the expressions of the already existing version. We can therefore understand why Josephus should have made use of expressions of LXX

of the apocryphal additions, embellishing them with some exegesis, probably of his own.¹¹ Origen¹² declared the Greek version and its additions canonical.¹³

Though the use of the expression 'common sense' is a platitude, we cannot refrain from asserting that common sense has played no part in the interpretation of the Book of Esther, either in ancient or in modern times. The Rabbis, by their homiletic interpretations, contributed not a little to change this strictly historical narrative into an incredible fable.¹⁴ A few among them seem to have felt that there was something strange about this book.¹⁵ But, as a rule, the talmudic and midrashic sayings concerning the events of our story are not of the least value for exegesis,¹⁶ and in all probability were not intended to be. Notwithstanding this obvious fact, we, even in our critical age, still follow time-honoured talmudic interpretations

(Jacob, *l. c.*, p. 262). On the other hand, his *Antiquities* was written for Gentiles, and therefore his intention may have been that his version of Esther should be in accordance with that written in Greek which might have been known to the critics of his period.

¹¹ We do not agree with Paton, *l. c.*, p. 39, that Josephus's additions are derived from an early form of Jewish Midrash, as no trace of them is found in the talmudic literature. His representation is a mixture of truth and fiction.

¹² In his letter to Julius Africanus, 3.

¹³ Cf. Paton, *l. c.*, p. 34.

¹⁴ See especially Talmud Babli Megillah 10 a-16 b, and cf. Paton, *l. c.*, pp. 18-24 and 97-104.

¹⁵ See Chapter V.

¹⁶ The talmudic chronology concerning the date of our story is of no value at all. It is noteworthy that in Talmud, Midrash, and Targumim, Mordecai is represented as a contemporary of Zerubbabel (see Ezra 2. 2, &c.). But in Talmud Babli Menahot 65 a, we find the same Mordecai as the contemporary of Hyrcanus and Aristobulus. This fact appears to have escaped the notice of all critics. Willrich might have made it the basis of his theory that the Book of Esther was written 48 B. C. E. (see n. 8), if he had known it

which obscure the right understanding of the book. Some exegetes are apparently over-fond of the rabbinical sayings, gleefully quoting and exploiting them for the purpose of stamping the story as legend.¹⁷ It is even possible that modern critics would hardly have hit upon the idea of seeing a legend in this story, if Talmud, Midrash, and Targumim had not embellished it with their exaggerated fables.¹⁸ It is regrettable to see that the strict line drawn by the mediaeval Jewish commentators between 'exegesis' (פֶּשֶׁט) and 'homiletics' (מִדְּרָשׁ) is completely ignored by modern scholars.¹⁹ Many of the rabbinical sayings dealing with Esther are of such a character that we cannot but believe that they were witty and homiletic remarks, partly to amuse, partly to exhort, the audience gathered around the Purim-table.²⁰

Martin Luther's condemnation of the Book of Esther in his *Table-Talks*: 'I am so hostile to this book that I wish it did not exist, for it Judaizes too much, and has

¹⁷ Characteristic in this respect is Paton's Commentary. As a book of reference it is an exceedingly valuable work. But with all modern critics he holds the story of Esther to be a mere fable. In order to prove this point, he employs a peculiar method. His exegesis in the main is actually based upon the Talmud, Midrash, and Targumim. Though on every point he quotes numerous opinions, his general contention is that the only correct explanation of the points under discussion is given by the rabbis, and, since the facts, according to their explanations, could not have occurred,—*ergo* the whole story is not true. Cf. also Siegfried, *l. c.*, p. 163, and Jahn, *l. c.*, p. 48.

¹⁸ Paton's observation (*l. c.*, p. 18) is interesting: 'They (the Targumim) show a fine feeling for the Hebrew idiom and are exceedingly suggestive to the modern interpreter'. So they are, as many theories of the modern interpreters have been suggested by them.

¹⁹ Paton, *l. c.*, p. 100, does indeed point out the difference between פֶּשֶׁט and מִדְּרָשׁ, and nevertheless treats the latter as serious rabbinical exegesis.

²⁰ See Talmud Babli Megillah 7 a.

too much heathen naughtiness,'²¹ largely contributed to prejudice the mind of Protestant theologians in dealing with it.²²

As early as the eighteenth century, scholars began to doubt the veracity of many facts described in Esther, as they seemed to be contradictory to the customs of the Persians recorded by Herodotus, and pronounced them unhistorical.²³ The nineteenth and twentieth centuries actually teem with hypotheses concerning both the origin of Purim and the contents of our story.²⁴ There is no exaggeration in declaring that it is easier to believe in the most improbable tales of antiquity than in these theories which are—with hardly any exception—flimsy, vague, and incredible. It is not necessary to discuss and refute them, as this has already been done—successfully and convincingly—by Siegmund Jampel.²⁵ But it is hardly fair to condemn the Talmud, as most of the modern commentators do, for holding the Book of Esther higher than the Books of the Prophets.²⁶ The Rabbis were not Bible

²¹ In his works, edited by Walsh, VII, 194 ; XXII, 2080. On Luther's opinion, cf. A. P. Stanley, *The History of the Jewish Church*, New York, 1879, III, p. 194. Paton, *l. c.*, p. 96, observes that Luther's verdict is not too severe. Paton shares this attitude with numerous Protestant theologians who approach this subject with the pre-conceived idea of justifying Luther's verdict.

²² But there were a few Protestant commentators who, notwithstanding their veneration for Luther's personality, had the courage to blame him for his subjective judgement, as did Carl Friedrich Keil, in his commentary on Esther, p. 613.

²³ For the literature of the eighteenth century, see Paton, *l. c.*, p. 111 f.

²⁴ Cf. Paton, *l. c.*, pp. 77-94 and 111-117.

²⁵ *Das Buch Esther*, Frankfurt a. M., 1907, pp. 45 ff.

²⁶ Emil Kautzsch, in his *Geschichte des Alttestamentlichen Schrifttums*, Freiburg, 1892, p. 117, vehemently denounces the Jews for holding the Book of Esther in such high honour, and considers it his duty as a Christian to protest against it. Similar opinions are expressed by Riehm, Wildeboer,

critics, and believed in every syllable of our story. Therefore how could they have thought differently? Of what use would have been the Prophets, if the Jewish people had been exterminated? In their belief, the words of the Prophets and even the Pentateuch would have disappeared, if the Jewish people had not been saved by Mordecai and Esther. The Fathers of the Church, in declaring the Book of Esther canonical, reasoned exactly like the Rabbis: If there had not been Purim, Christianity would not have existed.

All the modern critics agree that our story was invented. Even Kautzsch, who is a moderate critic, is unable to find

Cornill, and others. They do not consider that Purim, according to the current conception, commemorates an historical event unequalled in the whole history of the Jews, their escape from complete annihilation, and 'all that a man hath will he give for his life'; therefore it is natural that the Book that records this event should be held in the highest esteem among the Jews. Even from a purely ethical point of view, this Book is not inferior to the other Scriptures, as it teaches the great lesson, not found in the latter, that Providence may rule the destiny of man by natural circumstances, without visible intervention; and this lesson was the hope and comfort of the Jews whose existence was extremely precarious during the last two millenniums. It is wrong to see in the celebration of Purim the spirit of revenge. The Jews do not rejoice at the hanging of Haman, but at their own escape, firmly believing that their own destruction would have been inevitable, if Haman had been left alive. Scholars ought to be more objective, put aside their personal sentiments, and be able to comprehend also the Jewish point of view in dealing with this Book. It is regrettable to find views such as are expressed by E. Bertheau, that in this Book we find that spirit of Israel which does not trust in God, but in its own power, and which refused to embrace Salvation when it came to them (*Die Bücher Esra, Nehemia, und Esther* by Bertheau-Ryssel, Leipzig, 1887, p. 375). Paton, *l. c.*, p. 97, observes: 'With the verdict of late Judaism modern Christians cannot agree'. But is this verdict the only point of disagreement between late Judaism and modern Christians? Do not the latter regard the whole Pentateuch as partly legendary, partly fabrication, and the secular history of Israel, in the main, untrustworthy?

an historical nucleus in it, and considers it romance.²⁷ Driver, who cannot be accused of prejudice, declares that 'it is not strictly historical, though it cannot reasonably be doubted that it has a substantially historical basis.'²⁸ There are only a few scholars who see in our story a really historical event.²⁹ Paulus Cassel's commentary,³⁰ notwithstanding its homiletic character and the numerous Christological remarks which have no bearing on the story, is full of sound judgement and contains a great many historical parallels and reminiscences which shed light on the events. It is a storehouse of real information. But it is extremely conservative, and sees in Mordecai and Esther the most splendid characters and heroes of Israel. One of the best attempts in recent years is Jampel's book cited above.³¹ With a great array of arguments he tries to prove that all the events narrated in Esther might have happened under the reign of Xerxes.

In the present writer's opinion, however, all the commentators have been on the wrong track. The facts, as already stated, were misrepresented in ancient times, and modern interpreters have placed the action in the wrong period. If we may depend upon undeniably historical facts, we are justified in contending that the Book of Esther is strictly historical. We even maintain that, if this book had never been written, historians might have found out that at the period in which we place this action the Jews were threatened with complete extermination. The question is not whether this event did happen,

²⁷ *Geschichte des Altt. Schrift.*, p. 116.

²⁸ An Introduction to the O. T., New York, 1898, p. 453.

²⁹ See the bibliography of the conservative treatises, marked with C, by Paton, *l. c.*, p. 113.

³⁰ *Das Buch Esther*, Berlin, 1891

³¹ See n. 25.

but how the Jews escaped the danger. The solution of this problem is presented in the Book of Esther.

The main event of the story actually happened under Persian rule, though not in the reign of Xerxes. The Jews had indeed been in danger of extermination, though not in the sense generally understood. Many of the statements our story contains find their support in historical facts. As for the others, they are absolutely credible as far as they are original. For this book was considerably interpolated at a later period. The reason is not hard to explain. We must bear in mind that the real danger impending over the Jews was a tempest in a teapot: the whole excitement did not last more than four days, in Susa as well as in all parts of the empire.³² With the death of Haman and the elevation of Mordecai, the condition of the Jews was no longer desperate. All the exegetes appear to have overlooked this fact. An event of this short duration did not make a lasting impression.³³ Its commemoration was no doubt annually observed by pious Jews. But the common people, after a few generations, may have neglected it, or may have feasted on Purim without caring about the origin of the festival.³⁴ They may have doubted the whole story, as Jews in prosperity soon forget troubles of former

³² By the splendid royal post under the Achaemenian rulers (see Eduard Meyer, *Geschichte des Alterthums*, III, p. 66 f.), the overthrow of Haman and the elevation of Mordecai must have been known to the officials everywhere, a few days after the arrival of Haman's edict.

³³ We shall see that there were religious persecutions, preceding Haman's decree, which lasted for several years. But these persecutions were of a sporadic character, as the rank and file of the Jews had not been affected by them (see Chapter VI).

³⁴ Numberless Jews in the present age are doing exactly the same, in enjoying the customary dishes prepared for certain festivals with great relish, without caring in the least for the religious character of the latter.

days, and as the danger could not reasonably be accounted for, it was looked upon as an incredible tale. The Jews did not remain untouched by the scepticism prevailing in the Alexandrian age. Living unmolested under the mild sway of the Lagidae and the first Seleucids, the Jews did not believe that a man like Haman had ever existed, or that a king should have decreed the extermination of their ancestors. The Book of Esther became popular with them under the rule of Antiochus Epiphanes (175-164 B. C. E.) and his successors, when they met everywhere with numerous men of the type of Haman intent upon destroying them. In those times of terror they looked for comfort to the Scriptures. They found only one book in which a similar event had been recorded—the Book of Esther. At that late period the actual events under Persian rule which had almost caused the destruction of the Jewish people were no longer known. Being now popular, this book became the favourite theme of the preachers and an object of special study. The teachers who had to explain it to the people made wrong interpretations, which subsequently were incorporated into the story. We may well assume that for the purpose of impressing upon the people the necessity of being united, and exhorting them to fight one for all and all for one, the preachers in their sermons took as their theme the decree of Haman, and explained to their congregations that the latter intended to exterminate all the Jews on account of a single individual. We know that the Jews of that period were unwilling to resist their enemies and to fight for their independence, and their leaders had to use any means for inducing them to do so by arousing their fear and hatred. To encourage the people to fight

their enemies without fear, the preachers told their congregations about the heroic deeds of their ancestors, who killed 75,000 men in one day without losing a single man. The Edomites, the hereditary enemies of Israel, were no less hostile at the time of the Maccabees, until conquered by Hyrcanus. Therefore Haman may by some witty preacher of the time have been made a descendant of Esau, by changing the gentile name *הבני* into *האנגי*.³⁵ Paul Haupt is partly right in observing: 'The spirit of revenge that breathes through the Book of Esther and manifests itself in the celebration of Purim seems perfectly natural as soon as we know that the book was written during the period of the Maccabees, after the Syrians had committed unspeakable atrocities in Judaea.'³⁶ These interpretations were later inserted into the Hebrew text. The Alexandrian translator was unfamiliar with them.³⁷

When we understand the historical events which form the background of the story, the social and moral state of the Jews of the period, and the psychological motives of the chief figures, our story will be viewed in a different light: Mordecai and Esther will lose their nimbus, Haman his terror, and Ahasuerus's decree against the Jews will no more be ascribed to his imbecility. Words or passages

³⁵ See n. 8.

³⁶ *Purim*, Baltimore, 1906. This paper contains numerous ingenious suggestions. However, the theories advanced there for the origin of Purim and for the prototypes of Ahasuerus, Haman, Mordecai, and Esther are impossible, as Paton, *l.c.*, pp. 80-82, has already pointed out. But P. Haupt is the only modern critic who is absolutely fair in his treatment of this story. However, on some points he goes too far. The Jews in post-exilic times were never persecuted on account of their nationality; thus the persecutions of the Russian Jews do not present a parallel to those described in the Book of Esther.

³⁷ See Chapter II.

contradictory to our interpretation will easily be recognized as later additions. But we must draw a line between additions and changes due either to exegetes or to errors of copyists and changes owing to circumstances over which the Jews had no control. The name Ahasuerus, which is undoubtedly identical with Xerxes, had been substituted for the real name of the king, for obvious reasons. In the Eastern countries under the rule of the Arsacids, this change was made rather early; in the West at a later period, at the time of the fixing of the Canon. This fictitious name led the modern commentators astray. Those who gave credence to the story contended that Xerxes was quite capable of doing all the silly actions ascribed to Ahasuerus, and made more or less successful attempts at reconciling these events with the historical facts recorded by Herodotus. But the overwhelming majority of exegetes rightly rejected these forced interpretations. There is, indeed, no room for doubt that the Ahasuerus of Esther cannot be identical with Xerxes, as we hope to prove in the third chapter.

CHAPTER II

The improbability of Mordecai's genealogy—His access to the harem—Haman's genealogy—The etymology of his proper and gentile names.

BEFORE proceeding to outline our own conception of the story of Esther, we consider it necessary to investigate some objections of a general character, though they have no bearing on our own interpretation. These objections, raised by all modern critics, appear to throw doubt on the veracity of the author of the book, and to betray a certain tendency to present an artificial contrast between two hostile races. Though others have already dealt with this subject, their conclusions are not quite satisfactory.

Esther
2. 5, 6.

(1) There is a chronological question of the highest importance. The author states: 'There was a certain Jew in Shushan the palace, whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a Benjamite; who had been carried away from Jerusalem with the captivity which had been carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away'. According to this statement, Mordecai, as fellow captive of Jeconiah (= Jehoiachin), was carried into captivity in the year 597 B.C.E. Shall we then believe that 123 years later he became prime minister, in the 12th year of Xerxes' reign, in the year 474 B.C.E.? But those who raise this question do not entertain any doubt that Kish, the ancestor of Mordecai mentioned in his genealogy, is identical with the father of Saul, the first

king of Israel. Accordingly, the clause 'who had been carried away' (אשר הגלה) can only refer to Mordecai, and not to Kish. However, this identification is by no means certain and is indeed emphatically denied by Ibn Ezra.³⁸ Then there is no reason why this clause should not refer to Kish and not to Mordecai.³⁹ Wildeboer,⁴⁰ Siegfried,⁴¹ and many other modern commentators refuse to accept this explanation, as it would be against the Masoretic division, which places this clause at the beginning of the following verse. But they themselves often completely disregard the Masoretic text, and would be correct in doing so here. Cassel is right in observing: 'One cannot imagine it possible that biblical commentators should have hit upon

³⁸ Ibn Ezra *ad locum* remarks: 'If Kish, mentioned in Mordecai's genealogy, referred to the father of Saul, the author of Esther would have mentioned the latter, since he was king and not his father' (ואילו היה אבי (שאול היה מזכיר שאול כי הוא מלך ולא אביו). No notice has been taken of this reasonable observation by the modern critics.

³⁹ The relative clause אשר הגלה occurs also elsewhere, as 1 Chron. 5. 4-6, where אשר הגלה תגלת פלנאסר refers to בארה בנו and Ezra 2. 1, where the clause אשר הגלה refers to the preceding noun הגולה and not to המדינה בני.

⁴⁰ *Die fünf Megillot*, in Marti's *Kurzer Hand-Commentar zum Alten Testament*, Freiburg i. B., 1898, 180.

⁴¹ In his commentary on Esther, *l. c.*, p. 148. We must consider that the chronological knowledge of the Masoretes was no more exact than that of the rabbis, who consider Mordecai a contemporary of Zerubbabel (see Chapter I, n. 16) and place the reign of Ahasuerus within the seventy years of the Babylonian Captivity. We may further presume that the Masoretes accepted in good faith the talmudic interpretation of the name מרדכי = מרא דכי = 'pure myrrh' = מור דרור, and thus did not know that Mordecai was a purely Babylonian name. Therefore the Masoretes had no reason not to refer the clause אשר הגלה to Mordecai. The latter might have been carried away into captivity in his childhood, and was still alive in the period of this story. Besides, the Masoretes may have earnestly believed that Kish in Mordecai's genealogy referred to the father of Saul.

such a monstrosity, in referring the statement of Jeconiah's exile to Mordecai.⁴² Moreover, the purely Babylonian name that Mordecai bears evidently shows that the author did not intend to say that he was born in Jerusalem. We would have to assume that the Persian-Jewish author⁴³ did not know that Mordecai was a Babylonian name, at a time when the cult of Marduk was still in existence. Wildeboer asserts that the author clearly indicates that it was not his intention to give a real genealogy.⁴⁴ There is not the least ground for such an assertion, as the identification of Kish with the father of Saul is at least doubtful. Siegfried remarks; 'By the brevity of the genealogy, the author, in omitting a few members of it, skips over the times of Saul to Kish.' But did the author omit merely a few members

⁴² *Das Buch Esther*, p. 51.

⁴³ Seeing that our author was well informed on Persian manners and institutions, a fact that is almost generally conceded, and was well acquainted with the Persian language, a fact that only those critics deny who are not authorities on Persian philology, as Jampel truly remarks, we may safely assume that the author was not a Palestinian Jew. P. Haupt (*Purim*, p. 3; Critical Notes, p. 116) believes that he was a Persian Jew. In the present writer's opinion, however, the Book of Esther was written in Babylonia (see Chapter V); and at that period the Babylonian Jews were just as well acquainted with Persian manners, institutions, and language as were the Persian Jews. But Haupt from his own point of view must assume that the author was a Persian Jew, since he contends that Esther was written after the Maccabean period, and at that time Persian Jews only could have been so thoroughly acquainted with Persian manners, institutions, and language.

⁴⁴ Paton, *l. c.*, p. 167, concedes that Jair may have been the father of Mordecai. The reason for his concession seems to be, because he cannot discover an ancient bearer of this name among the Benjamites. Shimei, however, cannot have been the father of Jair, since there once existed a man belonging to the tribe of Benjamin whose name was Shimei son of Gera (2 Sam. 16. 6, &c.). Nor can Kish be the father of Shimei, since the same name was borne by the father of Saul. But there were four bearers of the name Shimei belonging to the tribe Reuben (1 Chron. 5. 4), Simeon

of this genealogy? From Mordecai to Kish would be at least fourteen generations,⁴⁵ and the author enumerates only three of them. But it is not impossible that the genealogy is not quite complete, and that between Mordecai and his exiled ancestor Kish there were a few more generations. We shall see that according to our conception the events of our story occurred about two hundred years after Jeconiah's exile, and we may reasonably doubt whether only three generations could have intervened between this period and that of Esther. For such a possibility we may point to Ezra's genealogy, in which his immediate ancestors are omitted.⁴⁶ A similar omission may be inferred in Mordecai's genealogy. We may suggest that they were men of a type whose names the biblical authors deemed unworthy to perpetuate, probably idolaters.⁴⁷

(*ibid.* 4. 26, 27), Levi (*ibid.* 6. 14 and 28), besides two others of the tribe of Benjamin (*ibid.* 8. 21; 1 Kings 4. 18). So also we find two bearers of the name of Kish, both Levites (1 Chron. 23. 21, &c.; 2 Chron. 29. 12). The genealogy of Mordecai given in the Second Targum, on which the contention of the modern critics is evidently based, is of course pure fiction, and badly invented, as from Mordecai to Kish it enumerates eleven generations, but from Kish to Benjamin twenty-eight generations.

⁴⁵ We find fourteen generations from Kish to the return from the Babylonian Captivity (1 Chron. 8. 33-8). The same number we find from Zadok to Joshua (*ibid.* 5. 34-41).

⁴⁶ Cf. Ezra 7. 1; 1 Chron. 5. 40. Bertheau-Ryssel, in his commentary on Ezra, p. 88, believes that the author merely intended to show us that Ezra was a lineal descendant of high-priests, and therefore omitted his immediate progenitors who were not high-priests. But this explanation is improbable. The line of the high-priests was well known, since Joshua and his descendants still held this office. What we want to learn is Ezra's relationship to this high-priestly line, and this point is altogether omitted.

⁴⁷ We shall show (Chapter V) that Mordecai's family does not appear to have been strictly religious, and may have belonged to those noble Jewish families which continued idolatrous practices in Babylonia, before its conquest by the Persians. The same may hold true of numerous priests,

Esther
2. 11.

(2) The author further states: 'And Mordecai walked every day before the court of the women's house, to know how Esther did, and what should become of her'. This statement is denied by most of the modern commentators, who regard as impossible that Mordecai should have been permitted free access to the harem without being a eunuch.⁴⁸ We freely admit that this is impossible, but impossibilities sometimes happen. One could never believe that prominent scholars and grammarians who know Hebrew pretty well should raise such an objection. The author does not say: 'Mordecai walked *in* the court of the women's house' (מרדכי מתהלך בחצר בית הנשים), but '*before* the court of the women's house' (לפני חצר בית הנשים). Mordecai did not enter the court of the harem, which no doubt was surrounded by a high wall, but walked outside of it, to inquire of the eunuchs about his adopted daughter. Many other Persians who had daughters there most likely did the same. Siegfried's sarcastic remark,

though Ezekiel seems to bear testimony that the 'sons of Zadok' kept themselves free from idolatry (Ezek. 44. 15). Some of them may have become corrupted after Ezekiel's death. The intermarriage of the sons of the high-priest Joshua with Gentiles shows that even the priests were not above reproach. Now there is a talmudic maxim that the names of irreligious men should not be recorded, based upon the verse וְשֵׁם רָשָׁעִים יִרְקַב 'the name of the wicked shall rot' (Prov. 10. 7). This verse is interpreted בְּשֵׁם מִסְקִינֵן בְּשֵׁם יִרְקַב, that we should not bring up their names (Talmud Babli, Yoma 38b). Such a conception is not purely rabbinic, but is found also in the Bible; cf., for instance, Exod. 17. 14; Deut. 32. 27; Isa. 26. 14; Ps. 112. 6, &c.

⁴⁸ Th. Nöldeke (*Encyclopaedia Biblica*, 1401), Wildeboer, Siegfried, in their commentaries, J. D. Prince (*Jewish Encyclopaedia*, under 'Esther'), and many others. Haupt (Critical Notes, p. 135) suggests that Mordecai may have been a eunuch. But the passage: 'and speaking peace to all his seed', clearly indicates that Mordecai had children, and we would have to assume that he became a eunuch after he had raised a family.

‘The author does not trouble himself about the difficulty, how Mordecai could have shown himself in the court of the harem and converse with Esther’, is characteristic of his commentary.⁴⁹ Besides, Esther at the time of this event had not yet been in the real harem that was under the supervision of Shaashgaz. The virgins under Hegai, not yet being concubines, may have enjoyed the liberty of communicating with their relatives.⁵⁰

Esther
2. 8, 14.

(3) The author finally states: ‘After these things did king Ahasuerus promote Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him, and set his seat above all the princes that were with him’. The commentators are by no means wrong in their arguments concerning the representation of Haman as descendant of Agag, in calling attention to the following points: (a) The statement that Haman was a descendant of Agag is in itself quite improbable. (b) It is incredible that the Persians should have tolerated the rule of an Agagite prime minister. (c) The representation of a racial contrast between the Benjamite Mordecai and his antagonist the Agagite Haman, renewing the ancient hereditary enmity between the Benjamite Saul and the Amalekite Agag, is too artificial to be regarded as an historical fact.⁵¹ The critics, however, do not seem to perceive that their arguments are

Esther
3. 1.

⁴⁹ The present writer is gratified to find that Haupt had already called Siegfried to account for his distortion of the truth, in observing: ‘The narrator, it may be supposed, knew more about Oriental manners and customs than did Siegfried. The author did not overlook the difficulty, but Siegfried overlooked **לְהַגִּי**’ (Critical Notes, p. 135). However, Siegfried merely repeated an old objection found by many earlier commentators.

⁵⁰ Paton, *l. c.*, p. 180, is also of the same opinion that the concubines under the custody of Shaashgaz were probably kept under stricter surveillance.

⁵¹ Wildeboer, Siegfried, &c., &c., and so also Paton, *l. c.*, p. 72.

not directed at the veracity of the author, but at a talmudic interpretation. They would never have thought of that contrast if Talmud, Midrash, and Targumin had not dwelt at length on it. It is well known that it is a pet fancy of the rabbis to represent all the enemies of the Jews, even Rome,⁵² as descendants of Esau—who had been wronged, but never committed any wrong in his lifetime—and it is still customary to designate any persecutor of the Jews as Esau. Characteristic in this respect is the Second Targum, which contains a complete genealogy of Haman, in which we find Greek and Latin names of oppressors of the Jews, and among them occur also those of king Herod and his father Antipater.⁵³ Hence it is obvious that the talmudic interpretation of *Agagī* is merely homiletic and should not be taken seriously.

However, for the sake of argument, let us admit that the gentilic noun *Agagī* actually means 'descendant of Agag', and that accordingly the narrative indeed implies a contrast between two hostile races. The question now arises whether the narrative would have been less comprehensible without that contrast. Would there be a missing link in the narrative, if the gentilic noun *Agagī* were entirely omitted? This question must certainly be answered in the negative. Nobody would presume to assert that the Greek version of Esther is not quite intelligible because it knows nothing about a racial contrast between Haman and Mordecai. This version further clearly furnishes proof that the gentilic noun *האגגי* could not have been in the original Hebrew text, but was due to some interpreter, as

⁵² See Lewy's *Handwörterbuch zum Talmud und Midrasch*, under 'Edom', and cf. Rashi on the passage *וְלֹאֵם מִלְּאֵם יִדְמִין* (Gen. 25. 23).

⁵³ For the genealogy of Haman, see Cassel, *l. c.*, p. 83 f.

already suggested in Chapter I,⁵⁴ who intended to represent that racial contrast, after the story had been rendered into Greek. The Alexandrian translator was undoubtedly well acquainted with the Scriptures and thus knew who Agag was. If he had found the gentilic noun **הַאֲגַגִּי** in his Hebrew text he certainly would have rendered it *'Ayayaîos*, not *Bovyaîos*.⁵⁵ There can scarcely be any doubt concerning the meaning of the latter term. The Persian word *baga* = 'God' is found in numerous Persian personal names, as for instance, *Bagaeaus*, *Bagoas*, *Bagopates*, *Bagophanes*, *Bagosaces*, &c.⁵⁶ Therefore, if we find *Bovyaîos* as gentilic name of a *Persian*, in a narrative the scene of action of which is *Persia*, we may reasonably see in it the Persian element *baga* and assume that *Bovyaîos* = *Bayaîos*. The same element no doubt occurs in the names of the eunuchs, **בְּנֵהֶן** and **בְּנֵהֶן**. The latter is rendered in the Greek version *Bovyaθάν* = *Bayaθάν*. Paul Haupt's explanation of the Greek *Bovyaîos* as a Homeric term, 'braggart' is far fetched.⁵⁷ The fact that the Alexandrian translator was forced to substitute fictitious names for the genuine Persian names in the Hebrew text, evidently shows that he did not understand the Persian language. Nevertheless the gentilic noun *Bovyaîos* is genuine Persian. Therefore we may safely assume that the equivalent of this term in the Hebrew original was not **הַאֲגַגִּי**, but **הַבְּגִי** 'the Bagoan'. A similar

⁵⁴ Cf. Chapter I, n. 8.

⁵⁵ Or the Alexandrian translator might have rendered it *Γωγαîos*, as did Lucian. The name Hegai usually rendered *Γαί* in the Greek version, is 2. 15 rendered *Γωγαîos*.

⁵⁶ See *Iranisches Namenbuch* by Ferdinand Justi, Marburg, 1895.

⁵⁷ *Purim*, p. 12; Critical Notes, p. 141. Haupt evidently overlooked that the element *βovγα* is also found in the eunuch's name *Bovyaθav* (instead of Harbonah, 8. 9).

name is borne by one of the Jewish leaders who returned from exile with Zerubabel, **בְּנִי**, which the Septuagint correctly renders *Bayouai*.⁵⁸

Moreover, how could the Hebrew author have intended to say that Haman was a descendant of Agag? He undoubtedly was familiar with the Scriptures, and must have known that Agag's whole tribe had been exterminated by Saul; Agag himself was slain by Samuel,⁵⁹ and the other tribes of Amalek had been destroyed in the time of Hezekiah.⁶⁰ Is it conceivable that a Jewish author would have dared to contradict the Scriptures? Now it has been suggested that the author's intention in designating Haman as an Agagite was merely to characterize him as an inveterate persecutor of the Jews.⁶¹ But also this interpretation is improbable. The fact that Saul and the people, notwithstanding the divine command, spared Agag and did not wish to slay him, indicates that Agag personally was by no means a ruthless oppressor of Israel, but suffered mainly for the many wrongs committed by his ancestors and his tribes, as the Bible indeed informs us.⁶² Thus there is no reason why just his name should have been selected for the formation of an *appellativum*, given to Haman, as a great enemy of the Jews. If that was the intention of the author, he certainly would have

⁵⁸ Ezra 2. 2, &c.

⁵⁹ 1 Sam. 15. 134.

⁶⁰ 1 Chron. 4. 43.

⁶¹ So Cassel, *l. c.*, p. 84.

⁶² Graetz, in his *History of the Jews*, vol. I, p. 91, states that the Amalekite king Agag appears to have caused great trouble to the tribe of Judah in the days of Saul. Now there is no doubt that the Amalekites made predatory incursions into the Jewish territory on all occasions. They did the same in the periods of Ehud (Judges 3. 13) and of Gideon (*ibid.* 6. 3). The Midianites did exactly the same. The other neighbours of Israel, as the Philistines and Ammonites, were no less hostile to the Israelites than the Amalekites.

called Haman עמלקי.⁶³ We may therefore contend that there is no truth whatever in this interpretation, and that in the two words אַנַּי and אַנַּי we merely have a similarity of sounds which is frequently deceptive. How fanciful identifications of this kind are, we can illustrate by identifying אַנַּי with the Babylonian word *agagu*, 'to be powerful', the Arabic أَجَّاج 'burning',⁶⁴ or even with Greek ἀγῶγα, 'leader.'

It has further been suggested, by Paul Haupt,⁶⁵ that the original reading of Haman's epithet was אַנַּי = *Gāgī*, in the sense of 'Northern barbarian', which was afterwards changed into אַנַּי. This suggestion is based upon the Lucianic recension, which renders Haman's epithet אַנַּי into Γωγαῖος. But Lucian's recension was made towards the end of the third century C.E., and is either, as some contend, an independent translation from the Hebrew, or a recension of the old Greek version, in which the Hebrew text was used as well.⁶⁶ Josephus⁶⁷ and the Talmud undoubtedly read אַנַּי, and therefore it is exceedingly improbable that Lucian should have found in his Hebrew original the reading אַנַּי. Furthermore, it is highly improbable that a gentilic noun *Gāgī*, derived from אַנַּי, should ever have been written with א. Lucian may have found in his Hebrew text the reading אַנַּי, but being well aware of the fact that Haman could not have been a descendant of Agag, considered this term either a scribal error or an

⁶³ Similarly Cassel, *l. c.*, p. 84.

⁶⁴ The present writer, offering these etymologies *ad absurdum*, was surprised to see them seriously suggested by H. Winckler (*Altorientalische Forschungen*, II, p. 381).

⁶⁵ *Purim*, p. 14; Critical Notes, p. 141.

⁶⁶ See Jacob, *l. c.*, p. 260, and Paton, *l. c.*, p. 38.

⁶⁷ Josephus states that Haman was an Amalekite (see Chapter I, n. 10).

arbitrary corruption on the part of the Jewish scribes for the purpose of representing a contrast between the Benjamite Mordecai and the Agagite Haman, and therefore believed that the original term was מִגִּי, which he rendered *Ἰωγαῖος*. He even may have seen in the rendering *Βουγαῖος* of the Alexandrian version a corruption from *Ἰωγαῖος* or *Γουγαῖος*. But even according to Lucian's reading we have no reason for the assertion that the author's intention was to represent Haman as a northern barbarian. The land מִי in Ezekiel's prophecies,⁶⁸ identical with *Gāga* in the Amarna Letters,⁶⁹ was undoubtedly situated in Armenia.⁷⁰ We know that this country became a part of Persia proper, where the Zoroastrian religion and the Persian language had been successfully introduced,⁷¹

⁶⁸ Ezek. 37. 2, &c.

⁶⁹ See H. Winckler's *Tell-El-Amarna Letters*, No. 5 (in Eb. Schrader's *Keilinschriftliche Bibliothek*, vol. V).

⁷⁰ Gog is designated by Ezekiel: 'chief prince of Meshech and Tubal'. These nations are of course identical with the Mushki and Tabal. They belonged to the Hittites (see A. Jeremias, *The O. T. in the light of the Ancient East*, vol. I, p. 280). We know that Tabal dwelt in Lesser Armenia (cf. *ibid.*, p. 281), and the Mushki are everywhere in the Cuneiform inscriptions mentioned in connexion with Tabal and Urartu. In Xerxes's army against Greece we find both nations, Tabal and Mushki, under the names of Tibarenians and Moschians under one commander (Herodotus VII, 78). These nations are mentioned in Ezekiel with Togarmah, identical with Tilgarimu, which, according to Dillmann, Kiepert, and Friedr. Delitzsch, is situated in South-Western Armenia (Del., *Paradies*, p. 246). The principal state of these nations was Magog, which comprises Eastern and Western Armenia (*ibid.*, p. 247). Now the Hittites, to which evidently all these nations belong, were by no means barbarians, if we may judge by their monuments. Thus the assertion that Gog is a term used for 'northern barbarian' is unfounded.

⁷¹ Cf. J. Marquart's *Fundamente Israelitischer und Jüdischer Geschichte*, Göttingen, 1896, p. 38, and Hastings's *Encyclopaedia* under 'Armenia' (Zoroastrianism).

and where the Persian nobles possessed large estates.⁷² Therefore, Haman could have been of purely Persian origin and nevertheless be designated by the gentile noun חַמָּן, because he was a native of the land of *Gōg*.

However, for the question, whether Haman was a foreigner or a Persian, we must consider, beside the gentile חַמָּן, his own name and that of his father. We know what a prominent part *Haoma* (*Hōm*) plays in the Zoroastrian religion. It was the name of the guardian angel and of the holy plant used for sacrifices.⁷³ The names of *Haman* and his father *Hamdatha*, 'given by Hōm', are undoubtedly connected with *Haoma*. Cassel is even inclined to suggest that such holy names could only have been borne by priests, and that Haman and his father were Magians,⁷⁴ who were a tribe of the Medes. But Cassel goes perhaps too far in this assumption. We cannot see why names like *Bagadatha* 'given by God', and *Mithradatha*, 'given by Mithra', should be less holy than the former, and yet there are bearers of such names who did not belong to the priest-caste of the Magians. Such names could even have been borne by foreigners, as we see that one of the Jewish leaders bore the name חַמָּן, which, as has been suggested,⁷⁵ is a hypocoristicon of *Bagadatha* (= חַמָּן, אֱלֹהִים?). Thus the Persian names which Haman and his father bore are no evidence that they were not of foreign descent. But

⁷² See Eduard Meyer, *Geschichte*, III, p. 138.

⁷³ Cf. A. V. Williams Jackson's *Zoroaster*, New York, 1899, pp. 25, 50, and Geldner's article 'Zoroaster', in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th ed.

⁷⁴ Cassel, *l. c.*, p. 82.

⁷⁵ A. Wellhausen, *Israelitische und Jüdische Geschichte*, p. 120. His suggestion that *Bagadatha* is a translation of *Jonathan* is improbable. Ed. Meyer (*Entstehung des Judentums*, p. 157, n. 2) thinks that *Bagadatha* and *Bagoi* are distinct Persian names, both derived from *baga*.

being a naturalized Persian, it is doubtful whether Haman's foreign descent would have lowered him in the eyes of the Persians and debarred him from occupying a high position.⁷⁶ Now it is true *Humma* or *Umma* is the name of an ancient Elamitic deity which occurs in numerous Elamitic proper names,⁷⁷ and we might see the same divine name in the names *Haman* and *Hamdatha*. We could therefore contend that Haman was by origin an Elamite. But who knows whether the divine elements *Hōm* and *Humma* are not identical? It would be a curious coincidence if *Hōm*, one of the chief deities in the religion of the Persians whose capital was in Elam, should not have some connexion with *Humma*, one of the chief Elamitic deities.⁷⁸ However, for the question under consideration it is quite irrelevant whether Haman was of Persian or Elamitic

⁷⁶ Herodotus VI, 41, states that the children of Metiochus son of Miltiades were accounted Persians, because their father had married a Persian woman.

⁷⁷ Cf. the Elamitic proper names *Ummanigash*, *Ummanaldasi*, *Teumman*, &c. But it is strange that we do not find the name of this deity among the names of the twenty gods enumerated by Ashurbanipal (cf. *KB*, II, p. 205). However, the element *amman* is found in the compounded divine name *Am-ma-an-ka-si-bar*.

⁷⁸ *Haoma*, generally considered to be identical with Vedic *Soma* (cf. Geldner, *l. c.*). The Persians did not take over this deity from the Elamites. We may only question whether there were not early relations between the Elamitic and the Vedic religions. The racial affinity of the Elamites is still an open question. They may have been related to their neighbours, the Kassites. Now it has been observed that some of the Kassite names bear most striking resemblance to those of the Hittites, and especially to those of the stock of Mitani (cf. Clay, *Personal Names of the Cassite Period*, pp. 44, 45). It has been further demonstrated that there were Aryan elements among the Hittite-Mitanni, as the Aryan deities *Mitra*, *Varuna*, *Indra*, *Nasatya* occur in the Hittite documents found by H. Winckler in Boghaz-köi (*Mitt. d. Deutsch. Orient. Ges.*, Dec., 1907, p. 51). Thus there is a possibility that *Humma* is of Aryan origin and identical with the Vedic *Soma*.

origin, as at the period of our story there was hardly any difference between Persians and Elamites.⁷⁹

But the question whether the Persians would have submitted to being ruled by a foreigner—a question which concerns Mordecai's position as well as that of Haman—we can by no means answer in the negative, if it is true that Bagoas, the most powerful prime minister under Artaxerxes III and his successors, was a native of Egypt.⁸⁰ Thus the premises from which the conclusions under discussion are drawn do not stand the test of impartial research, and the objections of the modern critics do not invalidate the contention that the Book of Esther is historical.

⁷⁹ If Ahasuerus is to be identified with Xerxes, we may doubt whether the Elamites, who had rebelled against Darius I, and set up a king of their own (Behistun Inscription, Col. I, 29), were in the short period of about forty years completely assimilated to the Persians. But if our story happened much later, we may reasonably assume that at that time there was hardly any difference between Persians and Elamites.

⁸⁰ See Justi, *Iranisches Namenbuch*, under 'Bagoas'. However, the whole argument concerning the descent and the name of Haman is absurd, and it would be a waste of time and of labour to deal with it seriously, if it were not for the fact that all modern critics attribute to it so much importance and base upon it mythological or historical theories. Haman might have been of Amalekite origin and be nevertheless to all intents and purposes a real Persian. His ancestors might have lived in Persia for a long period, though his foreign descent was still known to the Jews—a fact that is of course quite improbable, but not impossible.

CHAPTER III

The author of Esther as an historian—The date of these events—The extent of the Persian empire—The coronation festivities—Xerxes' war with Greece—His queen Amestris—The Jews outside of the Persian empire—The diaspora—Jewish persecutions in post-exilic times—The improbability of Haman's decree—Xerxes' character—His attitude towards the Jews—The new possessions of Ahasuerus.

IF a book contains anachronisms, as do the Books of Daniel, Tobit, and Judith, we may doubt its historical character, since its author could not have committed errors of this kind if he had known the history of the period in which the events are said to have occurred. The author of the Book of Esther, however, is not guilty of anachronisms, and was well informed on Persian manners and institutions. Therefore, we have no reason to assume that his knowledge of Persian history was inferior to that of the Greek writers of his period. From this point of view we shall investigate the events of our story, and demonstrate that the Ahasuerus of Esther cannot be identical with Xerxes.

Esther i. i. (1) The story opens : ' Now it came to pass ⁸¹ in the days

⁸¹ The Imperfect with *waw consecutivum* in וַיְהִי, that implies a preceding verb in the Perfect, and is always used in continuation of a historical narrative, is here correct. The Book of Esther continues the history of Israel, and thus forms a part of the other historical Books. The author does not intend to write the story of Ahasuerus, and presupposes that the reader is acquainted with the earlier history of this king, as Bertheau-Ryssel, *l. c.*, p. 379, strangely explains. Nor is the use of the Imperfect with *waw consecutivum* an imitation of the older histories, designed to suggest that Esther belongs to the same class of literature, as Paton, *l. c.*, p. 120 assumes.

of Ahasuerus, this is the Ahasuerus who reigned from India even unto Ethiopia, over a hundred and seven and twenty provinces'.⁸² The intention of the author evidently was to give to the reader exact information concerning the king under whose reign the events narrated occurred.⁸³ He assumes that several Persian kings bearing that name are known to his readers—as Ibn Ezra explains—and therefore fixed the date by the additional remark, that the Ahasuerus of the story was that king who ruled from India to Ethiopia, and no other king bearing the same name, for the dominion of the other did not extend so far. If this king was Xerxes, there was no need to fix the date.

(2) The king of the story did not lose any of his hundred and twenty-seven provinces during the whole period of his reign. But Xerxes did lose a considerable part of Asia Minor, in the sixth and seventh years of his reign, as we

⁸² The identification of the term מדינה with 'satrapy' is decidedly wrong. The titles אחשדרפנים, פחות, and שרי המדינות represent three classes of officials. The first were rulers of satrapies, as is well known, the second were governors of smaller territories, and the last were the governors of districts. The word מדינה is a derivation from דין 'to judge', and means 'the seat of a judge, judge's circuit'; and therefore in Arabic and Syriac the terms for 'city' are مَدِينَةٌ and ܡܕܝܢܬܐ. Judaea was a *Medinah*, not a satrapy. In a later period, Judea and Galilee were considered two different מדינות. Accordingly, there is no discrepancy between the author of Esther and Herodotus, who states that Darius I divided the Persian empire into twenty satrapies (III, 3). Cf. Keil, *l. c.*, p. 616, and Paton, *l. c.*, p. 123.

⁸³ Wildeboer, Driver, and others deduce from this passage that the reign of Ahasuerus lay in a past somewhat distant at the period of the author. But we ought to give the author credit for more sense. The latter evidently intended to present this story as an ancient document. Hence it is improbable that he should have expressed himself as if he intended to show that those events occurred in the distant past. Therefore it is obvious that his sole intention was to fix the date of that ruler under whose reign the story occurred.

know that most of the Greek territories became independent after the battles of Salamis, Plataea, and Mycale.⁸⁴ This fact seems to have been overlooked by all the exegetes.

Esther
1. 2, 3.

(3) The story continues: 'In those days, when the king Ahasuerus was sitting on the throne of his kingdom, which was in Shushan the palace, in the third year of his reign, he made a feast unto all his princes and his servants; the power of Persia and Media, the nobles and princes of the provinces being before him'. In these passages the author seems to contradict himself. The clause, 'when the king Ahasuerus was sitting on the throne of his kingdom', evidently implies that this feast took place on the occasion of the king's accession to the throne, and immediately the author states that it occurred 'in the third year of his reign'. Hence it is obvious that the former clause can have no other meaning than 'when the king Ahasuerus was firmly established on the throne of his kingdom'.⁸⁵ Both the Alexandrian translator and Rashi felt this difficulty; the former therefore renders this clause *ὅτε ἐθρονίσθη βασιλεὺς Ἀ*. This phrase contains, as Jacob points out, the special Egyptian term for the coronation festivities of the Ptolemies.⁸⁶ Rashi explains this clause בידו כשנתקמה המלכות 'when the kingdom was established, in his hand'. Both interpretations may mean the same. The author evidently intends to inform us that the king

⁸⁴ See Ed. Meyer, *Geschichte*, III, p. 416.

⁸⁵ Paton, *l. c.*, p. 124, observes: 'The language suggests the beginning of his reign, but 1. 3 says that it was in the third year'. H. Winckler (*Der Alte Orient und die Geschichtsforschung*, 1906, p. 21) thinks that this phrase means: 'when he ascended the throne'. H. Willrich, *l. c.*, p. 15, sees in this expression an official coronation that may have been celebrated three years after the accession of the king. But cf. Keil, *l. c.*, p. 617, and Bertheau-Ryssel, *l. c.*, p. 384.

⁸⁶ See Jacob, *l. c.*, p. 281.

of our story did not feel himself secure in the possession of his throne at the beginning of his reign. He must have had a rival who challenged his right to the throne. Therefore no festivities took place on his accession. But in the third year of his reign, after having defeated his rival, and being now generally recognized as legitimate ruler and thus firmly established on his throne, the king celebrated the event in the manner described. This was actually a coronation feast. If this interpretation is true, the king cannot be identified with Xerxes. The latter being the son of Darius and Atossa, the daughter of Cyrus the Great, his right to the throne, after his accession, was not contested—though during his father's lifetime there might have arisen a doubt whether Xerxes, who was born in the purple, or his elder brother should succeed to the throne.⁸⁷ There is no record that Xerxes had to assert his right to the succession against any claimant. None of his brothers rebelled against him.

(4) The events narrated in the second chapter of Esther could hardly have occurred between the third and seventh years of Xerxes' reign. He was at that time fully occupied with his preparations for the war against Greece. The advice of the courtiers seems to have been carried out in the sixth year. But Xerxes was at that time in Greece. The selection of Esther took place in the seventh year. But the testing of the other virgins, before Esther's turn came, must have lasted several months. We would have to assume that Xerxes at that time was already back from Sardis. Such an assumption is not impossible, but rather improbable.

(5) Esther could not have been the queen of Xerxes

⁸⁷ See Herodotus VII, 2. 3.

between the seventh and twelfth years of his reign, as the queen at that time was Amestris, and she cannot be identified with Esther.⁸⁸ We cannot accept Jampel's forced suggestion that Esther was not a real queen, but one of Xerxes' wives—not a concubine⁸⁹—as she is continually referred to as queen in our story. Moreover, according to a statement of Herodotus, Darius made an agreement with the six conspirators against Pseudo-Smerdis, stipulating that the king was to marry into no families except those of the conspirators.⁹⁰ If this statement be true, it is very improbable that this agreement was disregarded by the immediate successor of Darius. But history shows that kings hardly ever faithfully observe agreements made by distant ancestors with their subjects, and we may well imagine that this agreement was violated in a later period. Furthermore, if we may believe Herodotus, the Persian kings had a very convenient ancient law that decreed 'that the king of Persia might do whatever he pleased',⁹¹ which enabled them to set aside any law or agreement that interfered with their own pleasure.

Esther 3. 6. (6) The passage 'The Jews throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus', and similar expressions, apparently imply that at the period of our story there were Jews outside of the Persian empire. Herodotus does not know anything about the Jews.⁹² This fact alone is sufficient

⁸⁸ Amestris was the daughter of Otanes (cf. Herodotus IX, 109; Ctesias, *Persica* 20). Cf. Paton, *l. c.*, p. 71 f.

⁸⁹ Jampel, *l. c.*, p. 114.

⁹⁰ Herodotus III, 84.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* III, 31.

⁹² Ed. Meyer (*Geschichte*, III, p. 218) is evidently wrong in identifying the people which are designated by Herodotus II, 104 as Σύροι οἱ ἐν τῇ Παλαεστίνῃ with the Jews. Herodotus VII, 89 used the same designation for the Syrians who, along with the Phoenicians, furnished three hundred vessels for the war against Greece. This of course can refer only to those

evidence that no Jews lived at that time among the Greeks. Egypt was under the dominion of Persia during the reign of Xerxes. An assumption that Jews lived among the independent, savage Scythians is not to be considered. The only independent, civilized country where Jews might have settled was Carthage, and so far we have no record of the existence of Jews among the Carthaginians. Hence it is highly improbable that Jews existed outside of the Persian empire at the time of Xerxes.

(7) The passage 'There is a certain people scattered Esther 3.8. and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of thy kingdom' distinctly shows that the Jews at the period of our story had already settled in all parts of the Persian empire. If those events occurred under the reign of Xerxes, it is hardly credible that such a dispersion should have been accomplished in the relatively short space of about sixty years. However, this objection is not conclusive.⁹³

(8) The main proof, however, that Ahasuerus cannot be identified with Xerxes, may be seen in the principal event of our story. If we are to believe that a Persian king had once decreed the destruction of the Jews, we must advance some plausible reason for such an action. Considering it from the point of view of all commentators, we encounter a monstrosity inconceivable to the human mind. Does it stand to reason that Haman, on account of a single individual, who had refused to pay him due homage, should have resolved to destroy a whole innocent race? Now

Syrians who inhabited the sea-coast, and the Jews in the Persian period were not inhabitants of the sea-coast.

⁹³ This problem is treated in the Appendix 'The Exiles of Judah and Israel'.

it is true, the bloody pages of Jewish history bear testimony to terrible persecutions of the Jews, in all ages, down to the present, through no fault of their own. But we must bear in mind that this hostile attitude was always caused by religious fanaticism and intolerance. In post-exilic times, the hatred against the Jews was never directed against the Jewish race, but against the Jewish religion. The Jew who became a pagan, or embraced Christianity or Islam, was in all countries and in all ages just as safe as one of the other races. It was always the aim of intolerant rulers to compel the Jews to abandon their exclusive position, and this task could not be accomplished except by means of persecution. We know that the Jews who abandoned their religion could attain to the highest dignity in the Christian hierarchy, even in the Dark Ages. But Haman's action is without a parallel in history. If he had been a religious fanatic, he would have compelled the Jews to abandon their religion, as did Antiochus Epiphanes.

However, let us admit that Haman was of an exceptional turn of mind, and desired to exterminate the whole Jewish race on account of Mordecai. But how can we believe that Xerxes was exactly of the same turn of mind and readily agreed to carry out his intentions? Jampel's suggestion that Xerxes was afraid of the Scythians, who frequently laid waste the country, and therefore believed that Haman's accusation referred to them,⁹⁴ is impossible. Who ever heard of enemies of this kind being destroyed by royal decrees? Xerxes might just as well have decreed the destruction of Greece! If the Scythian hordes had been so weak as to be destroyed by the people, they could

⁹⁴ Jampel, *l. c.*, p. 114.

not have inspired any fear. There was no need to ask special permission and offer a large amount of money for the destruction of enemies of this kind. If he had been afraid of these hordes, Xerxes would gladly have given anything to rid himself of them. Moreover, the words of Haman, 'scattered and dispersed in all the provinces of thy kingdom', distinctly indicate that he could not have referred to the Scythians, who were by no means scattered and dispersed in all the provinces, but came in large bodies from their steppes whenever they committed their depredations. It is also preposterous to assume that Xerxes could have decreed the extermination of a people without knowing their name. The testimony of classical authors, quoted by Jampel, that Xerxes was of very inferior intelligence, 'being a body without a soul', does not deserve any credence. The only authority for the personality of Xerxes is the honest, unbiased Herodotus—who, though he may in some cases have been misinformed, never distorted the truth. The profound remarks which Herodotus ascribes to Xerxes, no matter whether they are oratorical embellishments or not, indicate that he considered this king a man of intelligence. It is wrong to see in the scourging of the Hellespont a childish action, as is generally done by the commentators. Herodotus and the Greeks did not look upon it as childish, but as impious. It was a symbolic action, a chastisement of the Greek god Poseidon, whom Xerxes may have held to be a creature of Ahriman, according to his religious conception. This action was in some respect similar to the striking of the Red Sea and of the Rock by Moses. According to Herodotus, Cyrus punished the river Gyndes by dividing it into three hundred and sixty parts for a lesser cause, his

favourite horse having been drowned in it.⁹⁵ Xerxes was not inferior in intelligence to any of his successors. Curtius justly describes him as having had a deep sense of the dignity of the empire.⁹⁶ The Persians in later times may have depicted him as an incapable ruler, attributing to his incapacity the disgraceful defeats Persia suffered under his reign. But exegetes have no right to stamp Xerxes a fool for the purpose of confirming the veracity of the Book of Esther.

It has further been suggested by Jampel⁹⁷ that Xerxes' detestation of the Jews may have been caused by his religious fanaticism. Now there is no doubt that Xerxes was a fanatical adherent of the Zoroastrian religion, apparently more so than his father Darius. The former even removed the statue of Bel-Marduk from the Babylonian temple, an action which his father 'had not the hardihood to do', as Herodotus informs us.⁹⁸ It has been pointed out that Xerxes after the fourth year of his reign is no longer styled 'king of Babylon' in the Babylonian documents; for this title could only be borne by a king who seized the hand of Bel-Marduk on the New Year festival.⁹⁹ Though the action of Xerxes may have been a political measure and done for the purpose of abolishing the kingdom of Babylonia and uniting it with the Persian empire, and not with any religious motives, nevertheless Xerxes could

⁹⁵ Herodotus I, 189. Grote, in his *History of Greece*, IV, p. 284, does not doubt this narrative, though it has been said that Cyrus's real intention was to put this river out of his way in case he should find it necessary to cross it.

⁹⁶ In his *History of Greece*, II, p. 273.

⁹⁷ *L. c.*, p. 119.

⁹⁸ Herodotus I, 183.

⁹⁹ Cf. Ed. Meyer, *Forschungen zur Alten Geschichte*, Halle, 1892, I, p. 474, and *Geschichte*, III, p. 130.

hardly have committed such a sacrilegious deed, if he had not been, as a true Zoroastrian, an inveterate enemy of the worship of idols. It has even been asserted that he destroyed Greek temples for the same reason.¹⁰⁰ This, however, is rather doubtful, as Herodotus states that on the day after the temple of Minerva was set on fire, Xerxes assembled all the Athenian exiles and bade them go into the temple and offer sacrifices after their own fashion.¹⁰¹ Xerxes would in all probability have destroyed the temples of his enemies, even if he had been an idolater. But the very fact that Xerxes was an ardent Zoroastrian is proof to the contrary, that he could not have been hostile to the Jews on account of their religion. We shall see that the latter were by no means averse to the Persian religion, as long as it remained in its purity, free from idolatrous representations. Both the Jewish and Zoroastrian religion were in the main points, superficially at least, alike, acknowledging only one God and having no idols.¹⁰² If Xerxes was an ardent Zoroastrian, he must have been favourably inclined towards the only non-Iranian subjects in his empire, who had a religion akin to that of the Persians, and readily acknowledged the divinity of Ahuramazda. As significant for his favourable attitude towards the Jews we consider

¹⁰⁰ Cf. G. Rawlinson's *Herodotus*, vol. III, p. 254 ; IV, p. 241, and Cassel, *l. c.*, p. 82.

¹⁰¹ Herodotus VIII, 54. The fact that Xerxes destroyed Greek temples is no proof that he was opposed to the worship of idols. Herodotus VIII, 35 states that he intended to invade Delphos for the purpose of seizing the riches which were laid up there. It was a political measure lest the Greeks might use these treasures against him. For the same purpose he may have plundered the very rich temple of Apollo at Aboe, according to Herodotus VIII, 33. Ed. Meyer (*Geschichte*, III, p. 255) contends that Xerxes was not hostile towards the Greek gods.

¹⁰² See Chapter V.

the statement of Ezra, 'And in the days of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judea and Jerusalem.'¹⁰³ It is noteworthy that nothing is said about the result of this accusation.¹⁰⁴ It is evidently due to Xerxes' benevolent attitude towards the Jews that this accusation remained without result. Seeing that we cannot assign sufficient reasons for the danger of extermination impending over the Jews under the reign of Xerxes, it is obvious that the latter cannot be identified with the king of our story.

Esther
10. 1.

(9) There is a remarkable statement in the last chapter of our story: 'And the king Ahasuerus laid a tribute upon the land, and upon the isles of the sea'.¹⁰⁵ This passage has puzzled all commentators: What connexion may this trivial remark have with the preceding events? Cassel's ingenious explanation, that the king indemnified himself for the ten thousand talents he had lost in frustrating Haman's decree,¹⁰⁶ is impossible. The money that Haman promised was not a profit, but indemnification for the loss of Jewish taxes. Further, the king had renounced all

¹⁰³ Ezra 4. 6. Ahasuerus in this passage is undoubtedly Xerxes, not Cambyses. Cf. Keil, p. 442 and Bertheau-Ryssel, p. 64.

¹⁰⁴ Marquart, *l. c.*, p. 63, sees in this passage the gloss of an interpolator. But if the intention of the alleged interpolator was to give us some information about troubles of the Judeans under the reign of Xerxes, why does he stop with the accusation? This 'interpolator' was apparently a better historian than the author of the Book of Daniel, since he placed Ahasuerus between Darius I and Artaxerxes I. Siegfried, in his commentary on Ezra, p. 24, observes: 'The petition to Ahasuerus is missing. . . . But this gap is filled out by Ezra 2. 17-25'. But Ezra omits this passage altogether, and the verses 17-25 correspond, with the exception of the proper names, to the Hebrew text.

¹⁰⁵ See Keil, p. 658; Bertheau-Ryssel, p. 545; Wildeboer, p. 196; Siegfried, p. 175; Paton, p. 303, &c.

¹⁰⁶ Cassel, *l. c.*, p. 236.

claim to this money, in saying: 'The silver is given to thee'. Finally, the king had already indemnified himself by confiscating Haman's property.¹⁰⁷ The author evidently intended to inform the reader about the great statesmanship of Mordecai, that the king by following his counsel was very fortunate in his enterprises, and increased his dominions by acquiring a new land and isles on which he levied tribute.¹⁰⁸ But we know that Xerxes did not increase his empire; on the contrary, he lost the Greek cities and islands of Asia Minor, the whole of Thrace, and the greater part of Cyprus between the years 479-476 B.C.E., and never recovered them. Hence such a statement cannot refer to the reign of Xerxes.

¹⁰⁷ Though Ahasuerus made a present of it to Esther, the property of his wife was always at his disposal.

¹⁰⁸ Ibn Ezra, *ad locum*, is the only commentator who recognized the meaning of this passage.

(To be continued.)